

Engaging with University History: Planting One Seed at a Time

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Abstract: University archives often hold materials related to little-known aspects of university history. At the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder), the libraries made use of an archival collection to develop One Seed, a seed giveaway program that told the story of how red sunflowers were originally cultivated there over 100 years ago. One Seed has been a popular program among students, university employees, and alumni, drawing attention to a unique part of university history, as well as the remarkable materials within the library archives. This article details the development and first three years of One Seed, showing how CU Boulder libraries used the program as an outreach tool while also forming partnerships across campus. Additionally, the article offers recommendations for replicating the program including considerations for state seed laws and institutional holdings.

Keywords: academic libraries, community engagement, library outreach, archival collections, partnerships, events and programming

Introduction

At any institution, university history has an audience that includes alumni, current students, employees, and often the surrounding community. Each campus has its own unique traditions, lore, and cultural touchstones that bind these groups together regardless of which years they spent there. University websites often include a page featuring campus history and traditions (University of California Berkeley, 2023; Yale University, 2023). This serves both recruitment and fundraising purposes as public-facing evidence of the university community's continuity and cohesion, drawing on a shared past and fostering interest in a vibrant future.

University history encompasses many different topics, including student life, faculty achievements, athletic events, and even natural history. The possibilities for its creative application can enrich academic life, student development, and relationships with alumni. University libraries and archives are often where these stories live. For example, Stofferhan (2009) instituted a faculty biography project wherein students initiated into Indiana State University's history honor society, Phi Theta Alpha, showcased their skills as upcoming historians by researching emeriti faculty through archival materials and crafting short biographies. Florida State University's (FSU) Heritage Protocol program, a combined effort from FSU's Alumni Association, University Relations, and University Libraries, has created multiple successful

alumni outreach efforts using materials in the archives, including a “Heritage Protocol Football Game” featuring articles in that day’s game program and historic photographs on stadium drink cups (Woodward, 2013). McFadden used the Alfred University archival resources on student life in a course designed to introduce research with primary sources, finding that it also deepened students’ appreciation for their school and allowed them to reflect on their own experiences as students there (McFadden, 2019).

As stewards of what are often the primary materials from which university history is made, archives are in a unique position to draw out these stories and create dynamic outreach campaigns that capture the attention of the university community (Thelin, 2009). A thriving university archive is an “engaging, active, campus unit that contributes to the daily operation of the university” (Swain, 2004). Programs that highlight university history “re-engage alumni as well as ... raise awareness among current students,” further ensuring that archives receive the resources and materials necessary to the continuation of their work (Meyer, 2011).

At the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder), the archives contain a remarkable artifact that few people previously knew even existed, let alone had ties to the university’s history: a bloom from a red sunflower that grew in 1910. In 2022, the libraries began a new program, One Seed, that allowed people to connect with university history in their own backyards, as well as to

learn about the rich resources in the Libraries' archives. This article details how One Seed was developed as a library program positioned to engage with the broad university community, as well as how it has been incorporated into other library programming and used to develop partnerships with other units on the CU Boulder campus.

The Red Sunflower

The common sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is native to much of the western United States and Mexico. Along the Colorado front range, where the plains meet the foothills of the Rockies, it often grows wild in open fields and along roadways. Such was the case in Boulder, Colorado in 1910 when Wilmatte Cockerell, a local high school biology teacher, found a red sunflower growing alongside many traditional yellow sunflowers across the street from her house, close to the University of Colorado campus. Wilmatte, alongside her husband T. D. A. Cockerell, who was a professor at CU Boulder, sprang into action to harvest and cultivate this mutation. Pulling from the recent rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in the western scientific community in the year 1900, over the next few years Wilmatte diligently crossed selected offspring with yellow sunflowers to create a permanent red variant of the common sunflower (Cockerell, 1912). Soon, they began talks with distributors to whom they would eventually sell their seeds. The new red variety of the common sunflower slowly spread in popularity throughout the 1910s and even won the Cockerells

a silver medal prize at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915 ([Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Silver Medal for Sunflower 1915], 1915).

Figure 1.

*Photograph of Theodore and Wilmatte Cockerell with sunflowers in their garden, 1935 *see Appendices for permission from Smithsonian Archives*



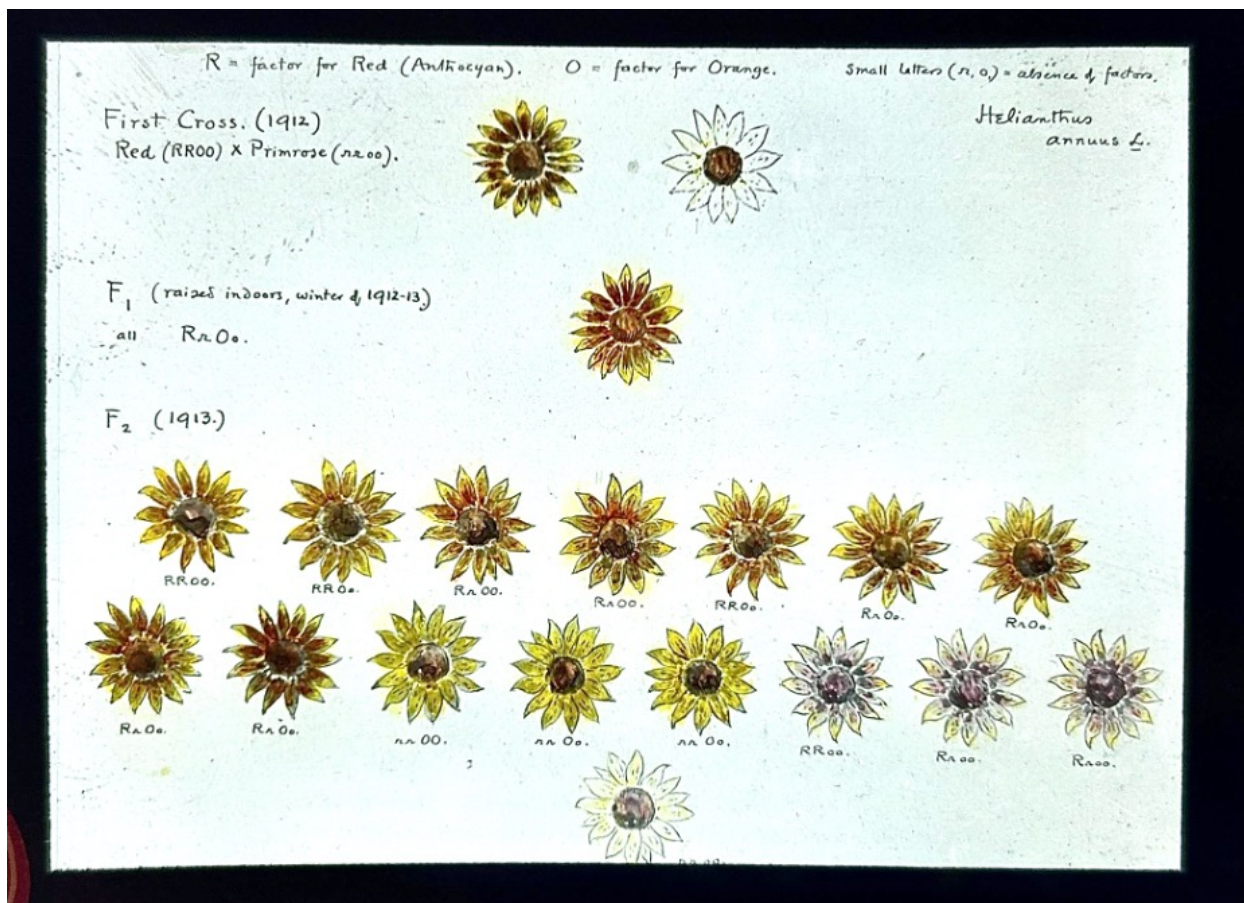
Meanwhile, the Cockerells began using the story of the red sunflower in their teaching. The red sunflower introduced high school and college students in Boulder to important biological concepts such as mutation and genetics, as seen in Cockerell's class notes and projected lantern slides from the 1910s. The

Cockerells continued to use the story of the red sunflower as an outreach tool, even with the advent of early film. The 1942 film *Mrs. Cockerell's Titles* only preserves text title cards, and, sadly, not the full film related to red sunflowers (Waldrop, 1942).

Figure 2

A glass lantern slide photograph titled “Red Sunflower Chart Showing Breeding of Wine Red,” from the T. D. A. Cockerell Papers. (Cockerell, ca. 1913).

Note: the authors took this image of a slide made by T.D.A. Cockerell in the Cockerell Papers from their archives. This item is in the public domain in the United States, since it was produced by T.D.A. Cockerell, who died in 1948.



While the singular red sunflower the Cockerells found in 1910 was unlikely to be the first instance of that particular mutation, it was probably the first time that a red sunflower was consciously harvested and cultivated (Cockerell, 1915). The whole narrative centers the University of Colorado Boulder and local scientists, melding campus history, natural history, and education. It also invites the community to delve into this and other campus history topics, since the University of Colorado Libraries holds the *Theodore Dru Alison Cockerell Papers* in the archives, which includes many images, educational materials, correspondence, and even the original type specimen of the first 1910 red mutant sunflower.

Figure 3

Wilmatte Cockerell in a garden of red sunflowers in Boulder, Colorado. (Cockerell, 1918). Note: The authors took this image of a publication in 1918, which is in public domain in the United States.



One Seed Pilot

One Seed takes its inspiration from One Read programs as well as seed libraries, both of which have roots in public libraries but which continue to gain in popularity in academic libraries (Boff et al., 2005; Ingalls, 2017). Instead of fostering community discussions around the same book, One Seed invited members of the university community to grow the same plant, red sunflowers, in order to highlight their connection to CU Boulder, as well as the unique materials in the archives. While the story behind the red sunflower was not entirely unknown among members of the CU Boulder community, it was far from holding a solid place in campus traditions and history. There were several questions, both practical and theoretical, to be answered in the first year of the One Seed program. For example, did students have access to gardening spaces? What would be the benefits of a program like this? How should the libraries go about procuring and distributing seeds? And, most importantly of all, would there be enough interest to justify continuing One Seed?

Prior to 2022, the CU Boulder Libraries did not have established Earth Day programming. In late April, just a few weeks before the end of the semester and the last spring frost date in Colorado, Earth Day seemed like an ideal occasion to launch One Seed. A month beforehand, the libraries'

communication team began marketing efforts that included digital billboards in Norlin Library and its branches, posters in several high-traffic areas around campus, and, most crucially, a brief write-up in *CU Boulder Today*, the daily campus newsletter. This newsletter text was also published on the Libraries' website (University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, 2022). These marketing efforts directed audiences to the One Seed LibGuide (<https://libguides.colorado.edu/oneseed>), which included planting instructions, the story behind the red sunflower, and information about the Cockerell papers in the archives, as well as a link to the digitized film collection.

At CU Boulder, 27% of the student population lives in university-operated or -affiliated housing, where they are unlikely to have access to gardening space (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2023). Similarly, off-campus housing includes apartments that rarely provide tenants with suitable places to grow 6-foot-tall flowers that require substantial amounts of direct sunlight. With this in mind, the libraries reached out to the CU Farm and Garden Club, a student organization that maintains a garden on campus as well as one at the Boulder Public Library. The club was enthusiastic about planting the red sunflowers and agreed to let the libraries share information about their group with students interested in gardening during the One Seed event.

Figure 4

A red sunflower outside of Norlin Library.



For the event itself, the Libraries' Learning & Engagement Team prepared 300 seed packets to distribute on Earth Day at a tabling area near Norlin Library's entrance. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and before the event had even begun, patrons were congregating near the tabling area to wait for seeds. Over the next three hours students and university employees visited the table, many remarking that it had been a long time since they had been *in* the library, but that they had made the trip across campus that day just for the seeds. They shared stories about their own gardens and

plans for flowers, expressing surprise at learning about the red sunflower's history and the related materials in the archives. By the end of the afternoon, nearly every packet was gone, and the reference desk fielded requests from those who had missed out for weeks afterward.

While reception for One Seed was overwhelmingly positive, one blunder to come out of the One Seed pilot involved the seed packets themselves, although this did not come to light until after the event. The Libraries had bought several large packets of red sunflower seeds and divided them into smaller seed envelopes, each affixed with custom One Seed labels that included a QR code leading to the LibGuide. This repackaging went against the Colorado Seed Act, and to do so legally the libraries would need to register with the state as a seed labeler and ensure that certain information was provided on each package (Colorado Office of Policy, Research & Regulatory Reform, 2019). For future years, CU Libraries would need to find a seed company registered with the state for packaging seeds.

A New Tradition: 2023 and 2024

The One Seed pilot garnered a substantial amount of interest from the CU Boulder community and the Libraries felt encouraged to continue the program. Packaging seeds in-house had been an economical solution that would have allowed the libraries to scale the event to the anticipated number of library patrons. Although the Libraries had underestimated the level of

enthusiasm for the program in the first year, working with a seed company to produce custom sunflower packets would require placing an order for a minimum of 2,000 packets. If 300 seed packets had been easy to give away, there was no guarantee that handing out over six times that number would be possible.

Figure 5

Seed packets for One Seed in 2024.



As in 2022, the Libraries partnered with the CU Farm & Garden Club to ensure that students without adequate gardening space would be able to connect with that group. Additionally, CU's Outdoor Services planted red sunflowers in flower beds around campus in 2023. Expanding the tabling effort to two days also helped to increase interest in One Seed. While Earth Day fell on a Friday in 2022, it was on a Saturday in 2023, and the Libraries chose to use a Thursday and Monday for the tabling events instead, giving away around 500 packets over the course of those busier weekdays. Branch libraries and the circulation and reference desks in Norlin Library each held a small basket of seed packets that was replenished as needed over the course of the next few weeks, dispensing around 800 packets. Additional giveaway points were comprised of both a student working in CU's University Herbarium and a student from CU's Masters of the Environment program, who was consulting for a local church about possible ecological landscaping solutions. The Libraries' Communications Team also found an audience interested in the red sunflower by giving away packets at outreach events for library donors, spurring conversations about how donors might "grow our collections." In all, these efforts left only a hundred or so seed packets that made for excellent library swag at other times of the year.

The Libraries have explored other ways to connect One Seed to broader events and activities. During the Culture Crawl, a yearly campus-wide event

showcasing activities and performances across CU Boulder, the libraries hosted several stations, including a One Seed table where students could view the original red sunflower along with photographs and other materials from the Cockerell papers. Since many stations featured crafts or other interactive elements, the One Seed Culture Crawl table offered materials for constructing red sunflower pinwheels, completed with a tiny bee. (When not dabbling in botany, Cockerell was a prolific entomologist who provided names for thousands of bees.) Library instruction may also be a possible avenue for further collaboration with other campus units. During the 2023 event, Ways of Knowing, a class from the Student Academic Success Center, visited the libraries to learn about the red sunflower and hear about the unique materials housed in Rare and Distinctive Collections.

The year 2024 marked the first time that One Seed was officially recognized as a campus tradition (University of Colorado Boulder, 2018). Qualifying as such, it turned out, depended mostly on simply asking to be added to the list. The Libraries continued to find new venues and audiences likely to enjoy the seeds, and several campus programs reached out to partner with the Libraries for events that featured One Seed. Faculty leadership programs and alumni association events made use of the seed packets as swag for attendees. In addition to all this, the Libraries were also invited to host a One Seed exhibit at the Campus Sustainability Summit and to participate in an

academic program's community building event. The One Seed campaign has undergone a slow, but steady growth process, with each year bringing new partnerships and interest in the archives.

Figure 6

The 2024 One Seed tabling event.



Recommendations for One Seed at Other Libraries

The University of Colorado Boulder was fortunate enough to have a unique plant with ties to university history sitting in its archives. Other institutions might be able to follow this formula, but those without the same luck should still feel encouraged to try a similar program on their own campuses. As academic libraries incorporate therapy dogs, meditation rooms, finals care kits, and game nights into their programming repertoire in the

name of maintaining the wellness and development of the whole student, seed libraries are also finding a place in colleges and universities (Ingalls, 2017). While One Seed is somewhat more aligned with library swag than with seed libraries (participants are not asked to harvest and return seeds at the end of the growing season), it shares an audience of avid home gardeners and “plant parents” with those programs. The National Gardening Association reported that 42% of households in the U.S. increased their level of participation in lawn and garden cultivation during the pandemic, a trend which has continued in subsequent years (Whitinger et al., 2021, 2023). These factors establish a strong basis for engaging students and other stakeholders with libraries and forming partnerships with campus programs or community organizations.

Selecting a Seed

While the red sunflower’s connection to CU Boulder’s history has been a substantial part of One Seed’s success, other factors also made it an excellent choice. Sunflowers are easy to grow, even for novice gardeners, and require minimal care after germination under most circumstances. As one of Colorado’s native plants, they also grow extremely well in the state’s long, relentlessly sunny summers. They are also able to grow in large pots, although their dramatic height will be reduced, and they may flower earlier in the seasons. (Indeed, many students asked about this possibility and Norlin Library also grew red sunflowers in large planters at the main entrance.)

Selecting a plant that is easy to grow, fares well in the local climate, and, if possible, can thrive in pots and planters will help ensure successful gardening endeavors for more patrons.

There is no reason for One Seed programs to confine themselves to growing the same plant year after year. The history of the red sunflower works exceptionally well for some purposes, such as fostering an interest in the CU Libraries' archives. However, choosing a new seed each year (in the style of One Read programs) could allow for the promotion of other library or campus programs and further engage the campus community through involvement in the seed selection process. For now, CU Boulder's libraries will continue to tell the story of the red sunflower, but future years might see variations.

Seed Laws

In the U.S. seed laws vary widely by state, with some states willing to enforce testing and labeling requirements that can effectively prohibit seed programs from taking place in organizations such as libraries and community outreach groups (Associated Press, 2014). Returning seeds at the end of the growing season, a common practice among seed libraries that seek to be self-sustaining, is also commonly curtailed. These laws are intended to protect farmers, whose livelihoods depend on the quality of the seeds they purchase and grow, but have stymied many libraries that have attempted to put heirloom varieties in the hands of hobby gardeners. This may be overreach or a

form of misapplication of a too broadly-written seed law, but given the experiences of libraries that have encountered issues with state agricultural departments, it is worthwhile to check state seed laws before determining how any seed program will operate. In the case of CU Boulder Libraries, a connection with a local public library that nearly had their seedling exchange shut down provided the impetus to reassess the packaging used in the pilot program. After consulting with the Colorado Department of Agriculture, purchasing seed packets from a company registered with the state was determined to be the best option.

Partnerships

As the process of growing One Seed continues at CU Boulder, the Libraries have sought opportunities to connect with other programs on campus. Library programs, even in a one-off capacity, provide a steady source of partnerships that can create unique opportunities for collaboration with other campus units. Additionally, these can readily reflect the ideas of STEAM education (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) that seek to integrate science with the arts and humanities (Colucci-Gray et al., 2019). In 2022, One Seed's first year, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* was selected as the CU Boulder campus One Read (Kimmerer, 2015). This provided an opportunity for cross-promotion to a shared audience with an interest in plants, and the 2022 One

Seed tabling event shared information on how to obtain copies of the book and details on upcoming One Read events. The Culture Crawl, mentioned earlier, and a collaborative ecopoetry display for National Poetry Month (also a popular spring library event at CU Boulder) are also excellent examples of how One Seed has allowed for internal partnerships with library programs.

While CU Boulder does not have a seed library, academic libraries with existing holdings of this type may be able to add on a One Seed program to further build community and explore campus or local history. A One Seed program that selects a new seed each year would work well here to promote new seed library offerings and respond to patron interests. Academic seed libraries often establish themselves as joint efforts between the library and a university's agriculture program or sustainability offices, and this model would work equally well for a One Seed program (Gleeson Library, 2023; University of British Columbia Library, 2023). These types of partnerships often provide a crucial way for seed programs to reach students who have an interest in gardening but live in housing without access to gardening space. At CU Boulder, this was accomplished through the connection with the student-run CU Farm & Garden Club and supplemented through campus flower beds maintained by CU Outdoor Services.

Tabling Events and Giveaways

Distributing seeds to patrons might be the easiest and most enjoyable part of a One Seed program, but it is also one that requires significant planning. CU's campus newsletter seems to have been the way that most people learned about One Seed, but targeted emails to faculty engaged in teaching or research related to plants spurred some to mention One Seed to their classes. Several students who visited the tabling event noted that their professors had told them about the program. Patrons sometimes also inquired whether they could take more than just a few seed packets, normally for larger gardening projects. In the first year, when One Seed only had 300 packets to distribute at the tabling event, the libraries had a small supply of leftover non-repackaged seeds that ended up being given to patrons for this purpose. With 2,000 seed packets this was less of a concern, and providing a contact email address in One Seed promotions and reaching out to groups that expressed interest in the seed giveaway beforehand ensured that the Libraries were prepared.

For staffing tabling events, One Seed has enlisted library employees who are often involved in cross-promoted programs such as the campus One Read, allowing for discussion on those. Getting input from an employee at the Libraries' Rare and Distinctive Collections was especially helpful for some of the more in-depth questions about the Cockerell papers or about the archives

in general. Additionally, having someone with extensive gardening experience on hand was incredibly useful because of the range of questions received at the table from both novice and expert gardeners. In all, patrons seem exceptionally willing to stop at the One Seed table and chat, whether to discuss gardening plans, to learn more about archival collections and library programs, or even to ask a reference question for an upcoming assignment.

Conclusion

One Seed has been incredibly successful for engaging the broader CU Boulder community with the Libraries as well as for cross-promoting other library programs. The program's popularity has also helped the Libraries develop a variety of partnerships with other campus organizations, extending the program's reach and potential for future growth. Other libraries could benefit from a One Seed program's adaptability in order to promote an existing seed library or to create a stand-alone One Seed program. At CU Boulder, One Seed's connection to university history has undoubtedly been a major factor in its popularity, and libraries should feel encouraged to select a seed with a compelling history, especially one that has ties to their institution, if possible. By highlighting a nearly unknown gem within the Cockerell papers in the CU Boulder Libraries' archives, the program has drawn attention to the unique resources within those collections and created a new campus tradition that will hopefully endure for years to come.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Permission from Figure 1



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